# National Children's Dental Health Month: Walter Reed dentists encourage brushing up on oral hygiene

**Walter Reed National Military Medical Center**
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Feb. 1 begins National Children's Dental Health Month, observed to bring awareness to the importance of oral hygiene and "how it can positively impact the entire body," said Navy Cmdr. (Dr.) Bradley Bennett, Hospital Dental Department chief, Pediatric Dentistry at Walter Reed.

Bennett explained that teeth are not only important for proper chewing and nutrition intake, but also for speech development and to establish self-assurance and confidence, especially for children and young adults. In addition, baby teeth serve as space savers for permanent teeth and help guide them into their proper alignment. Therefore, it's imperative that proper care of a child's teeth begins early," he added.

A baby tooth normally remains in a child's mouth until a growing permanent tooth is ready to erupt through the gums. If a child loses a tooth prematurely due to an accident or extraction of a diseased tooth, it can lead to the loss of space and has the potential to cause the new permanent tooth to erupt out of alignment or fail to erupt completely, Walter Reed dentists explain.

They added that care of a child's teeth should begin with an expectant mother having a healthy diet, lifestyle, and maintaining regular appointments with her dentist and physician. Then, even before the child's first tooth erupts, parents and care providers should wipe the child's gums with a clean, soft wet cloth after feedings or at least twice a day.

"Please start brushing with a 'smear' of fluoridated toothpaste as soon as the first tooth erupts," Bennett stated. "Modern eating habits can quickly turn healthy teeth into cavities."

Bennett added that getting families to change dietary and oral hygiene behaviors to prevent oral disease can be a challenge but can be avoided by developing good habits early.

According to Dr. Clayton Cheung, also a pediatric dentist at Walter Reed, children should brush their teeth twice a day for at least two minutes for each brushing under adult supervision. "Adults should always check to make sure the brushing was effective," he shared.

"Two minutes is the goal, but sometimes that can be a bit too long for the little ones," Bennett added. "The key is using fluoride. I ask all patients to spit out excess toothpaste, but don't rinse afterwards."

Bennett said flossing should begin when children have all their adult teeth, or once the child's teeth begin to touch.

"A child usually does not have the fine motor skills to floss themselves until about the age of 8 or 9 years of age, [so] parents should floss the child's teeth until the child acquires this skill," Cheung added.

"Flossing is great at reducing gingivitis, but there is less evidence that it prevents cavities between teeth. Those are usually caused by diet," Bennett shared. "We often see children who are 2 or 3 years old with a mouth full of

cavities because of juice, soda, or even constant milk consumption. A big part of our team's work is discussion of diet and the impact it has on a child's teeth and overall health."

"Fruits and vegetables are great; juice is not," Bennett added. "Fluoridated water has reduced cavity prevalence over the years as well."

In addition, the Walter Reed dentists recommend children limit foods that can get stuck in grooves and pits of their teeth for long periods, such as chips, candy and cookies, and to brush soon after eating them. Also, fresh fruits and vegetables increase saliva flow, which can help wash away food particles.

Parents should also schedule routine check-ups. The first dental visit is recommended by 12 months of age, or within 6 months of the first tooth coming in, said the dentists. If it's been more than six months since your child has seen a dentist, schedule an appointment as soon as possible.
Also, replace your child's toothbrush every three to four months.

Bennett added Walter Reed's pediatric dentistry offers a full range of dental services, including general anesthesia in the hospital for certain oral procedures. "Dental surgery is a common option but can cost a family several thousand dollars when seeking care in the community. We can provide that service for free to our military families."

He said he finds it most rewarding watching children grow into young adults and taking a child who is fearful of the dentist and working to repair that relationship.

"A lot of our work involves behavior management of children," Bennett explained. "We have many options at our disposal, but having a team geared to supporting children is a big advantage to a general dentist. We also focus on ensuring proper growth and development."

"I loved treating children while in dental school, but as [military] dentists, we usually only treat active-duty personnel. However, while living in Sicily, I had the opportunity to treat many children of military members and really loved the interaction with children. That has only grown since I pursued peds as a career."

For more information about pediatric dentistry at Walter Reed, visit https://walterreed.tricare.mil/Health-Services/Dental/Hospital-Dentistry, or to make an appointment call (301) 400-2060. More information is also available about Children's Dental Health on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) site at: https://www.cdc.gov/oralhealth/publications/features/childrens-dental-health.html#:~:text=February%20is%20National%20Children's%20Dental,than%20children%20who%20don't.